

The U.S.-Turkish Relationship:

Prospects and Perils

Jul 30, 2003



Brief Analysis

On July 25, 2003, Turkish deputy prime minister and foreign minister Abdullah Gul addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Gul served as Turkey's prime minister between November 2002 and March 2003, and as minister of state and government spokesman in the Welfare Party government of 1997. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks and the question-and-answer session that followed. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=157\)](#)

Turkey is Changing

Turkey is going through major reform as a result of its European Union (EU) accession process. Significant political reforms are transforming the Turkish political landscape, making the country more democratic. Another aspect of this change is that since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed power last year, the elites are no longer in power, and those outside Turkey therefore essentially face a new country. Turkey is a more perfect democracy than before.

- Political reform and EU accession. The current government in Turkey is very clear about joining the EU. This is at the top of its agenda. Turkey will fully satisfy all EU accession rules, the so-called Copenhagen criteria. The AKP government will act fast to put the Copenhagen criteria into effect, but it will also be very cautious in this process. The AKP government will not miss the EU's 2004 deadline, when Turkey will come up for consideration to receive an EU accession calendar. No problems will likely be encountered in this process because the AKP government has the absolute majority in parliament. These reforms are not concessions to the EU; the Turkish government will approve the reforms not only for the EU but for the Turkish people as well, and that is why they will be passed quickly and will be enforced afterward.
- National Security Council. The role of the National Security Council in Turkey is being reconfigured with the EU reforms, especially with the seventh EU reform package that the AKP government is due to legislate soon. This process is taking place with input from the Turkish military. In the end, the Turkish political system will be harmonized with the EU accession criteria.

Iraq

- Reconstruction. A stable Iraq will serve Turkey in many different aspects, including economics, trade, and tourism. That is why Turkey wants to contribute to Iraq's reconstruction. Turkey wants the transformation in Iraq to be successful and believes that there can be an arrangement whereby the United States can be responsible for security issues in the region, while Turkey can help with the logistics. Since the Iraqi war, the U.S. Department of State and the Turkish Foreign Ministry have established a high-level mechanism for coordinating humanitarian supplies to the Iraqi people and logistics supplies to the coalition forces.

Intentionally or not, Turkey has in recent months been portrayed as a nation that bargains over what economic benefits it can get for its stance on Iraq, which is inaccurate. For example, the economic benefits Turkey might

receive in return for sending troops to Iraq has not been important in Turkey's decisionmaking process. Turkey can offer humanitarian help in Iraq, such as providing water, gasoline, and security. Such assistance is politically important, because in the absence of such basic necessities, there is a danger that some Iraqis may think their situation was better before the war. So Turkish humanitarian assistance could be of considerable utility to the U.S.-led coalition as well as to the Iraqi people.

- Northern Iraq, Kurds, and the Turkmens. Before the war, Turkey made a distinction between Iraq and northern Iraq, reflecting realities on the ground there. Now, Turkey has only an Iraq policy, not a distinct northern Iraq policy. Turkey believes that the right decision for all groups in Iraq is to unify under the new Baghdad regime. Although Turkey encourages the Turkmens to be good Iraqi citizens, Turkey cannot control this group, for they are not Turkish citizens. Turkey is interested in the welfare of the Turkmens as well as the Kurds, who are, after all, relatives of the Turks.

Turkey is not involved in any secret activities in northern Iraq, nor does it have any ambitions for that territory. The recent incident between U.S. and Turkish forces in Sulaymaniyah was very unfortunate. The United States had been given all the information about the Turkish Special Forces in the area, but that did not stop the conflict from occurring. The Sulaymaniyah incident was a local issue, and the involvement of certain high-level officials in the talks to solve the incident proved useful for mending the ties between Turkey and the United States. Turkey hopes that such a clash will not happen again. Turkish soldiers have fought side by side with American soldiers many times in history. For example, last year, Turkey had the responsibility of leading the international forces in Afghanistan, even staying two months longer than its agreed-upon period of leadership. Furthermore, it should be noted that after the United States, Turkey has accrued the highest number of casualties in UN-sponsored operations around the world.

- Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). One of Turkey's major concerns is the presence in northern Iraq of a large number of members of the terrorist group Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK), formerly known as PKK. Turkey is planning to undertake an amnesty law facilitating the return of members of KADEK from Iraq to Turkey so that they can reintegrate into society. This action could be an important input toward U.S. efforts to eliminate terrorism.

Relations with the United States

Turkey's bonds with the United States will thrive because they are based on common values like democracy, freedom, and a market economy. Turkey's relationship with the United States and the EU complement each other. The United States supports Turkey's EU membership, and this fact can be demonstrated by President Bush's lobbying for Turkey's admittance to the Union. Turkey has no reason to expect that the American position on Turkey's EU accession will change because of the different opinions that Turkey and the United States have on the Iraq issue. The war on Iraq has led to varying opinions with other NATO members as well; such differences are normal in any bilateral relationship.

- Turkish troops to Iraq? Some months ago, the United States gave Turkey a questionnaire concerning its capacity to contribute to the reconstruction of Iraq. Turkey responded to this inquiry, which was solely about capabilities, not about intentions. The current trip to Washington represents the first time that Turkey has officially been asked to provide troops. The AKP government needs time to make a decision on this issue through its democratic processes, including consultation with the Turkish parliament. Turkey hopes that its relationship with the United States remains open and sincere on the troop deployment issue. The two countries should not try to push each other into a corner. The visit to Turkey last week of Central Command (CENTCOM) combatant commander General John Abuzaid will help the two countries decide how best to work together on these issues. High-level discussions on Iraq between the AKP government and Secretary of State Colin Powell, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld have been candid. Nonetheless, the AKP government remains entrenched in democratic principles and therefore Turkey will maintain its sovereignty vis-a-vis decisionmaking on the Iraq issue.

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